DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 290 CS 210 741

AUTHOR Lieberman, David
TITLE The Significance of Significance in Structure.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Coherence; *Expository Writing; Identification (Psychology); Logical Thinking; Theory Practice Relationship; *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Author Text Relationship; Text Organization

ABSTRACT

One of the goals of writing instruction is to teach students to develop coherence in their writing; however, writing instruction that relies too heavily on logical connections and organizational techniques often introduces so many rules that students lose their personal connection to what they write. Coherence has less to do with structure than with perceiving writing as an expression of the writer's life. In terms of creating coherence, by emphasizing the logical relationships and ignoring the writer's sense of significance about what he or she is saying, instructors are leading students away from the point of organizing the writing from the strongest base they have for making sense to themselves, let alone the reader. Looking at actual pieces of writing reveals that structure does not make a text coherent, rather a sense that the author has linked sentences that belong together because they are important to him or her. Even in academic writing, an author's sense of what best fits into the field and is important to make the intended point is linked by a common thread of the author's interest (even when emotion is carefully eliminated from the text). Students must be made aware that the emotional detachment of academic prose is an illusion--the opinions, evaluations, and emotions are only disguised. Showing students that organizing their work around their own sense of significance about what they are saying will help them become better writers. Grading for significance is not easy, but teachers can use many pre-writing activities to help students mature as writers of coherent prose. (SKC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED284290

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

The Significance of Significance in Structure

by David Lieberman

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

David Lieberman

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 210 741

The Significance of Significance in Structure
by David Lieberman

Over the years composition scholars and teachers have developed a number of valuable pre-writing techniques that encourage students to pursue their writing as an open-ended discovery process and to explore thoughts and feelings that are personally significant. The goal of this process is coherence, as Knoblauch and Brannon state in their book Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing, it is "to render articulate and therefore intelligible, the welter of images, thoughts and experiences that comprise the writer's awareness."

However, just at the point when students are taking their welter of initial discoveries and organizing them into a coherent draft, frequently, it seems to me, we introduce instruction which dissipates both their exploratory spirit and their personal connection to the writing.

The pedagogy I have in mind contains the underlying view that the way we make sense of a text, the way we come to a feeling of coherence in reading and writing is a matter of cognition alone, and more specifically an outcome of the logical relationships we find in the writing. Practitioners seek to help students by concentrating their attention in the organizing and revising stages on learning to recognize and highlight the logical patterns in the text. Some theorists go so far as to suggest that attention to the logical structure already in the text can be a useful technique for generating new writing.

In this talk, I will try to show how coherence is much more than a matter of logical interconnection and why I feel it's

important for us to recognize this. What I will suggest is that seeing something as coherent has to do with our perception of the writing as an expression of the writer's life. What is significant to the writer is what helps us most as readers and writers to get our bearings as to whether the passage makes sense.

While many theorists and textbooks have worked with the notion that coherence is a logical matter, a good representative of the view can be found in none other than Knoblauch and Brannon's book I quoted earlier. I say this because it is an influential and in many respects excellent book, and because their theory of coherence is worked out in a broad way. I want to explain their theory now, briefly, and use it as one basis in our comparison of ways to evaluate coherence.

According to Knoblauch and Brannon, getting meaning into a coherent organization involves several operations. First of all writers "conceive information," pulling out what is relevant to their purposes from the larger web of reality. Second, writers put information into assertions. Finally, the writer starts to connect those assertions on the basis of entailment -- "an intuition that something <u>ought</u> to follow" from the preceding network of assertions at any point in the text. This sense of entailment is presumably the basis for the generative power of the existing structure, for entailment acts as a gate or "constraint" suggesting some constructions while impressing the writer or reader with the inappropriateness of others. According to the authors the most important source for this intuition of entailment is the pattern of "organizational logic." As the

writing proceeds, fewer and fewer assertions will harmonize with the overall "logic of interconnection" until finally none will and the writing is complete.

Knoblauch and Brannon don't go into a lot of detail themselves about this "logic of interconnection," deferring in their footnotes to others, and specifically citing Winterowd as a theorist who has enumerated some of the varieties of entailment. To apply Knoblauch and Brannon's theory then we will rely in part on Winterowd's more detailed listing of entailment possibilities. He describes seven alternatives which parallel the categories of propositional logic.

I want to present now two pieces of writing, one an excerpt from a freshman paper, and the second a passage from professional academic writing, to go through and see how our sense of coherence develops, whether on the basis of logic as Knoblauch, Brannon and Winterowd describe or in a deeper way, grounded in what seems to be the writer's sense of significance.

The first passage is from a student paper entitled, "Agriculture: An Industry in Need:"

> (1) The government also reduced drastically the number of Soil Conservation Service employees and vehicles assigned to each district. (2) This means a poorer quantity and quality of service provided. (3) Policies such as these hurt the farmer as well as the consumer. (4) The farmer suffers by being ignorant of some useful new conservation practices, while the consumer is hurt because the farmer is not making the best use of his land, which causes production costs to rise and forces prices for the consumer up.

If we look at this passage as a composite of ideas whose orderly relationships create a coherent `picture'of the subject, we might

name those relationships this way:

Sentence one, which we might consider the topic sentence, states the precipitating action.

Sentence one then leads to an outcome in sentence two, or as Winterowd would say: sentence one entails sentence two by conclusivity.

Sentence two leads to an additional outcome in sentence three of the initial situation; in other words, entailment by coordination, though perhaps more importantly sentence three is an implied result of sentence two itself -- this is a connection of conclusivity.

Finally, sentence three, which is a generalization, moves to a more detailed explanation in sentence four; in other words, sentence three entails sentence four by inclusivity.

Let us examine this now from another point of view. While sentence 2 does explain a particular result of the situation described in the first sentence, by calling the service "poorer", an evaluative term, it also hints that this is an <u>important</u> bit of information. This significance is only fully revealed in sentence three. Here, we find much more than a mere addition of information. Sentence three asserts not just any outcome but rather the important one, the one that calls forth the writer's concern. Sentence three therefore belongs after sentence two because it fleshes out the <u>significance</u> hinted at in the second sentence, of the situation described in the first sentence. Sentence four deepens our understanding by giving alarming details about this dire predicament. We feel it fits after sentence three because this information is so germaine. While we can see a pattern of logical relationships here, the sense we make of the passage, its coherence, the impression that the sentences <u>belong</u> together - and in that arrangement - has more fundamentally to do with our sense of the author's concern about

the plight of farmers.

It's not that the idea of `policies hurting farmers' complements or completes the idea of `poorer government services' that leads us to say the sentences belong together. Consider this: if after writing in sentence two that the Soil Conservation Department cuts would result in poorer quality service the writer were to go on and say that this, however, is minor compared to the harm resulting from other government department cutbacks, the logical structure of the passage would be different. Where sentence three was originally an outcome of sentence two, it is now a reversal in the direction of thought. And yet we would still feel the passage to be as coherent at this point as it was originally because our sense of the import to the author has not been interrupted. This `sense of what is significant to the author' then, seems to me to be what determines most strongly what we look at in evaluating coherence.

Let's look now at a passage from a piece of professional academic writing. This is the beginning of the research literature review section in an article entitled "Sex Roles, Interruptions and Silences in Conversation" by Zimmerman and West.

> (1) The recognition that sex role differences are reflected in language patterns has stimulated a good deal of recent research, in this area (cf. Henley and Thorne, 1975). (2) To consider just one example, Robin Lakoff (1973) suggests that a separate "woman's speech" exists, characterized by a greater preponderance of such forms as tag questions, compound requests, and questioning intonational patterns offered in the context of otherwise

declarative answers. (3) She also examines the semantics of sexism by focusing on the discrepancies in supposed referential equivalents (e.g. "master" and "mistress"), and typically female euphemisms (e.g., "lady") for which there is no colloquial male equivalent.

(4) Even a cursory review of studies of sex roles and language patterns suggests that various features of language and speech furnish the resources for male dominance (and, for that matter, female submissiveness) in pervasive and often subtle ways (references cited).

Winterowd and Knoblauch and Brannon would probably characterize entailment this way:

Sentence one states the topic of the passage;

Sentence two gives an example of the research mentioned in the first sentence; in other words, sentence two is entailed by being <u>included</u> in the subject matter of sentence one;

Sentence three provides additional information for the example given in sentence two; in other words, entailment by coordination.

Sentence four draws a conclusion from the previous paragraph.

But let's look at the coherence beyond the passage's strictly logical interconnections. Sentence two does give an example of the research pointed to in sentence one. But we feel entailment, that it belongs after sentence one, because it is a <u>key</u> example. By key I mean, for one thing, we must assume the authors have chosen Lakoff as their example based on their estimation of her "representativeness" of the work done in this area. Similarly, their choice of which of Lakoff's findings to present in sentences 3 and 4 also rests in part on a judgment of the relative value of all her findings. These evaluations stem from the authors' familiarity and relationship with the field of socio-linguistics. This is what we assume, anyway, in considering the sentences part of a coherent presentation.

But it's in sentence four that we start to see the most influential role that significance plays. For this sentence makes a switch from the first three. Up to that point we had been reading mainly about sex role differences in language but sentence four focuses our attention on the issue of male dominance in language use; that is the conclusion the whole passage has been leading up to. Now, do we read sentence four as just another idea framing the ideas of the earlier sentences? I think, rather, that we assume male dominance must be a concern that the authors have. Of course they don't tell us here that they're concerned about male dominance. But our automatic sense is: Why would they be moving to this conclusion if it didn't concern them? And our assumption is confirmed through one trace they leave in an otherwise non-evaluative paper: in the introduction they speak of "endurng problems of power and dominance in social life." Both this hint from the authors and our common sense suggest that the orientation of sentence four springs from the writers' concern.

Furthermore, this framework of significance orients the particulars of the other sentences in the passage as well. The example of Lakoff in sentence two and the facets of her research summarized in the second and third sentences were obviously chosen because they would support this conclusion.

After a careful review, then, the passage seems to us organized substantially by the thread of the authors' interest in male dominance. Logical relationships have a place in our sense of entailment here, but they function only as an integrated piece of the larger activity of connection which takes shape as the authors

unravel the subject in a direction consonant with their interest in it. The conventional view misses this larger process of connection, mistakenly thinking that internal organization accounts for everything.

But there is an important way that this passage differs from the first one, for we get very little expression of the authors' emotion or evaluation, little feeling of their concern with the subject. They paint, instead, a factual picture of the subject, an image to be viewed from a distance, without communicating its importance. This is common in academic writing; the bulk of the writing contains little that points to the authors' relationship to or concern about the subject. The whole effect is to camouflage the significance that fulfills such a crucial role in organizing the text.

At this point it's easy to fall into the illusion that the picture just is, without an emotional life behind it. And without seeing the human motivations and common sense judgments that create the form we can fall back to the further illusion that it's the given set of logical combinations at a certain point which entails particular logical sequels.

As we perpetuate this view there are several consequences for our students. First of all, much of the richness and complexity in their expression gets squeezed out. For what is lost in considering coherence a logical or even more generally a cognitive phenomenon is an appreciation of how the things people write are integrally connected to their personal stance in the world. We are cutting off ideas from the weave of living,

setting up a strong division between the process of gaining authoritative knowledge and our actual understanding which functions day to day.

Furthermore, in terms of creating coherence, by emphasizing the logical relationships and by ignoring the writer's sense of significance about what she is saying, we are leading students away at the point of organizing the writing from the strongest basis they have for making sense to themselves, let alone to other people. All the good work they may have done in getting a grounded perspective on the subject is suddenly interrupted by an approach that doesn't recognize those strands of concern and curiosity which connect their thoughts.

There are immediate implications for the way we teach. Knoblauch and Brannon talk about the problems in student writing where "a statement `doesn't follow'" or where "two assertions aren't yet closely enough related" as the kinds of things attention to logical entailment can help with. Their analysis jibes easily with Winterowd's more specific teaching suggestion that a list of available logical choices can aid a student in selecting new "arguments" when she gets stuck.

But writing doesn't work like that. If a person has run out of things to say or is rambling then it must mean that his real purpose has not been understood clearly enough. What does the person really have to say? That's the question writers need to ask themselves. As this is done the logical connections will take shape for the writer. Pointing out a writer's disconnectedness or abruptness simply as a matter of logical inconsistency, without talking about what the writer considers

important will result in a shallower text -- and a less coherent one, for not merely does a reader rely on a clear pattern of ideas to understand a text, but just as importantly on how clearly and richly the speaker's underlying concern and curiosity are communicated. The more richly these are expressed, the more necessary will be the ideas and the more vital will be the connections between those ideas.

Understanding the significance of something is not easy. In terms of particular writing projects we can help students by encouraging them to write on topics which touch them and in which they can pursue their curiosity and concerns. Also, we can encourage students to ground their explorations through such pre-writing activities as visiting places where their topics are being lived, and exploring through memoir how their interests and concerns developed. Another useful technique is having students be aware of motifs, images, and metaphors that come up in pre-writing which seem to capture something about the subject and perhaps in the drafting itself to unfold the image, presenting for the reader a layering of insights.

In the long run, understanding the significance of something comes, I think, from having a strong sense of personal identity -- knowing one's own unique responses to situations, and at the sme time understanding one's connection to the communities one is a part of. Ultimately, we will benefit our students most by helping them on the long road toward developing a sense of self, by encouraging them to explore political, emotional and spiritual facets of their own lives and activities situated in the world.

It's not that thinking through the logic or ideas aor attending to the organizational structure are never useful. They are sometimes useful, but by themselves they don't tap the deeper sources of vision a writer must draw from. I am proposing an alternative, that we put our emphasis on helping students through all stages of the writing process to develop and learn to be guided by their curiosity and conern grounded in daily life. In this way, we can help them mature as writers, taking the difficult path of finding our way into the world through writing.